

04 September 2013

The Board
MEF Victoria



It was with great delight that I received the opportunity to attend the IPWEA Conference “Exploring New Territory” in Darwin this year. As I had never travelled to Darwin before, I was looking forward to the opportunity not just to explore new ideas and broaden my networks, but also to briefly explore the Northern Territory (NT). Thanks to my flexible workplace, I was able to explore the NT for another week following the conference, which gave me the opportunity to see some interesting road solutions as well as enjoy the indigenous and natural heritage in the Kakadu, Katherine and Litchfield regions.

As this was the first IPWEA conference I have had the opportunity to attend, I was excited about the opportunity to learn from the 487 delegates, speakers and sponsors that were in attendance. On the very first night I was introduced to the Young IPWEA board and a number of other young members who heartily welcomed me and included me in their group for the duration of the conference. I was encouraged and inspired by these young engineers who have developed within the public works profession and many of whom now hold management positions within their respective organisations. I received many words of wisdom and fresh perspectives from these young engineers and was able to exchange ideas and thoughts with them on ways to address some of the issues public works engineering is facing today.

During the course of the conference, I noticed that my attitude toward public works engineering changing as I better understood the ability to make a real difference in the local community as well as the rewarding career opportunities within the field. Although I have understood these before, I gained a real appreciation, particularly from the young engineers who have made local government their career, of just how much opportunity and potential there is to make a positive difference. We need to work hard to change the community’s perception of public works to reflect the incredible benefits, achievements and opportunities which exist.

I found that many of the papers presented challenged the status quo and attempted to assist in approaching old problems from new perspectives in order to achieve a better result. There was a good mix of technical papers along with papers on the many other aspects of public works engineering. Some of these papers and approaches were of particular interest for me within my current role at South Gippsland Shire working with sealed & unsealed roads and flood recovery.

One of the challenges we face in South Gippsland is maintenance of our unsealed road network. I am currently undertaking a couple of trials of different maintenance techniques, and so found the ideas and alternatives presented in the unsealed road stream to be helpful in highlighting further testing I could undertake to enhance our material life and selection processes. Particularly beneficial was the opportunity to discuss this with the presenters and gain further insight into their approach.

Hearing about new approaches to asset management and the collection and use of condition data was of interest as I work closely with the assets team to keep an up to date asset management system which yields meaningful data for analysis. Being exposed to alternative collection methods, new uses for data, and alternative asset management software options was quite beneficial.



I returned from the conference with a much broader understanding of the available surfacing options for sealed roads having attended paper presentations on innovative surfacing options, warm mix asphalt, and discussed SERT, JetBlack and potholing products with the Fulton Hogan representatives. These discussions and presentations have given me the opportunity to better understand the available treatments, their specific applications and associated costs to compare with our standard reseal program.

I found the flood recovery sessions to be of particular interest and relevance to my current line of work. My primary role is assisting in the flood recovery works at South Gippsland Shire, and I am continually looking for new ways to improve the work we do, the methods by which we achieve it and streamline the acquittals process with VicRoads. It was good to hear about the way in which other shires had approached their flood recovery efforts and learn from their successes and mistakes. I was particularly struck by the strong collaborative relationship Moira Shire had formed with VicRoads during their recovery works and as a result, I am now focussing on building a strong, informed and trusting relationship with VicRoads through our flood recovery works.

The keynote addresses at the IPWEA 2013 conference were outstanding with a big focus on the 'soft' issue of people management. The keynotes and associated paper presentations were very helpful in challenging the traditional approach to hiring/firing and people management, giving me a good grounding in best practice workforce management and how to get best value out of the team. As well as challenging me to think through how I interact with managers and colleagues, these presentations assisted in identifying a number of areas I can improve on and ways in which I can assist and encourage my employer.

The Young IPWEA panel session was particularly helpful, as it gave a voice to some of my concerns and feelings as a young engineer trying to establish myself in the workplace. It was definitely reassuring to hear discussion and responses from the older engineers around ways in which the problems many young engineers face of opportunity, acceptance, engagement, training and career path can be addressed. It's nice to know that the industry is starting to take action!

At the IPWEA 2013 conference I was encouraged to chase opportunities and be prepared to take risks. Employers were challenged to take a risk with a young engineer and let them 'stub their toe' to achieve their full potential. Without taking risks with young engineers, the public works industry is in trouble. We need young engineers. We need to give young engineers opportunities to take risks in order to attract and retain them. We need to change.

Every few months I take time to reflect on my work and personal life in order to identify areas in which I can improve, push myself and change my approach. I found the IPWEA conference to be a good opportunity for this - combining new ideas, great advice and new networks. It was encouraging to build networks with young engineers who are facing similar challenges, knowing I can call on their assistance and encouragement as I follow their footsteps into the engineering workplace.

I wish to express my thanks to the Victorian chapter of the MEF for giving me this amazing opportunity to expand my networks and be exposed to new ideas. I count it a real privilege to be identified as one of Victoria's three young up and coming public works engineers.

Regards,
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WORKS ENGINEER